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RECENT INVESTIGATIONS ON THE COST OF LIVING

By HENRY J. HARRIS

Of the Library of Congress

The presiding officer of this session has asked me to give a brief statement concerning the important studies on the cost of living published in the last five years. As the amount of material which has been published on this topic is voluminous, only those studies which were made by official bodies will be mentioned.

These studies may be roughly divided into three groups: first, the British Board of Trade investigation, an international investigation; second, the studies of household budgets made by the German and by the Swedish statistical offices; third, the studies of account books of institutions and of similar sources made by the statistical offices of France, of Amsterdam, and of Trieste.

The British investigation. The Board of Trade study was undertaken by that body after it had decided that an international coöperative investigation was not feasible at that time. The principal topics covered are (a) rents paid for workmen's dwellings, (b) retail prices paid by the wage-earners for food and for fuel, (c) wages and hours of labor in selected industries. The countries covered were Great Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, and the United States. The date of the investigation in Great Britain (the first country studied) was October, 1905, and in the United States (the last of the countries studied) was 1909. All of the data relates to cities or towns.

The study of conditions in England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland,¹ or 94 towns in all, was made in the month of October, 1905,

¹ Great Britain. Board of trade. Cost of living of the working classes. Report of an enquiry by the Board of trade into working class rents, housing and retail prices, together with the standard rates of wages prevailing in certain occupations in the principal industrial towns of the United Kingdom. With an introductory memorandum. Presented to both houses of Parliament by command of His Majesty. London, Printed for H. M. Stationery off., by Darling & son, ltd., 1908.

liii, 616 p. 2 fold. chart. 33½^{cm}. ([Parliament. Papers by command] Cd. 3864.)

A digest of the data in this volume will be found in Bulletin 77 of the United States Bureau of Labor.

although the report included a supplementary statement for October, 1907. The report does not contain any budgets or household accounts, but gives, first, a careful comparison of rents of workmen's dwellings, using the middle zone of London as the basis; second, the retail prices paid for food as shown by the books of tradesmen, of coöperative stores, and of the "multiple" stores of large firms; third, the standard rates of wages prevailing in the building trades, the engineering (i.e. the foundry and machine shop) trades, the house furnishing trades, and the printing trades.

The second report in this series related to conditions in Germany.² In this investigation family budgets were secured from 5046 "working-class" families for a "normal" week. The information secured was for the same date as the British study, namely, October, 1905, though a supplementary statement for March-April, 1908, was included. The industries for which wages were secured were the building trades, printing trades, and foundry and machine shop trades. The study of rents and of retail prices for food follows the same general scheme as the first study. The editors of the report take particular pains to point out the difficulties in making international comparisons; although the same plan of study was followed, the different habits and modes of living in Germany as compared with the United Kingdom made it unsafe to draw any conclusions except as to general tendencies.

The study of conditions in French towns³ also follows the same

²Great Britain. Board of trade. Cost of living in German towns. Report of an enquiry by the Board of trade into the working class rents, housing and retail prices, together with the rates of wages in certain occupations in the principal industrial towns of the German Empire. With an introductory memorandum and a comparison of conditions in Germany and the United Kingdom. Presented to both houses of Parliament by command of His Majesty. London, Printed for H. M. Stationery off., by Darling & son, Ltd., 1908.

xli, 218 p. map. 33½^{cm}. ([Parliament. Papers by command] Cd. 5065.)

A digest of the data in this volume is given in Bulletin 87 of the United States Bureau of Labor.

³Great Britain. Board of trade. Cost of living in French towns. Report of an enquiry by the Board of trade into working class rents, housing and retail prices, together with the rates of wages in certain occupations in the principal industrial towns of France. With an introductory memorandum and a comparison of conditions in France and the United Kingdom. Presented to both

plan as the German; household budgets for a "normal" week were collected from 5600 working-class families; the data are for the date October, 1905, with some supplementary information for October, 1907.

The report on Belgian conditions⁴ is based on information collected in June, 1908, though the editors state that they believe the data are comparable with those collected in other countries for October, 1905. Household budgets for a "normal" week were collected from 1850 families; the information concerning rents, retail prices of food, and rates of wages in the three selected industries is similar to that in the other reports.

The study on conditions in cities of the United States⁵ relates to the month of February, 1909, and includes 28 cities east of the Missouri River. The investigators collected 7600 budgets of "working-class" families for a normal week and tabulated wages in the building, printing, and foundry and machine shop trades.

The editors of the reports are careful to make their compari-

houses of Parliament by command of His Majesty. London, Printed for H. M. Stationery off., by Darling & son, ltd., 1909.

liv, 430 p. fold. chart. 33½^{cm}. ([Parliament. Papers by command] Cd. 4512.)

A digest of the information contained in this report will be found in Bulletin 83 of the United States Bureau of Labor.

⁴ Great Britain. Board of Trade. Cost of living in Belgian towns. Report of an enquiry by the Board of trade into working class rents, housing, and retail prices, together with the rates of wages in certain occupations in the principal industrial towns of Belgium. With an introductory memorandum and a comparison of conditions in Belgium and the United Kingdom... London, printed for H. M. Stationery off., by Darling & son, ltd., 1910.

xli, 218 p. map. 33½^{cm}. ([Parliament. Papers by command] Cd. 5065.)

A digest of the data in this volume is given in Bulletin 87 of the United States Bureau of Labor.

⁵ Great Britain. Board of trade. Cost of living in American towns. Report of an enquiry by the Board of trade into working class rents, housing and retail prices, together with the rates of wages in certain occupations in the principal industrial towns of the United States of America. With an introductory memorandum and a comparison of conditions in the United States and the United Kingdom... London, Pub. by H. M. Stationery off., printed by Darling & son, limited, 1911.

xcii, 533 p. incl. forms. map. 34^{cm}. ([Parliament. Papers by command] Cd. 5609.)

A digest of the data in this report is given in Bulletin 93 of the United States Bureau of Labor.

sons in extremely general terms, but it may be said that they find the situation of the American workman more favorable than that of any of the others; that the British workman is more favorably situated than the German, French, or Belgian workman; and that the Belgian workman is least favorably situated.

The index numbers compiled by the editors of the report are placed together in the following paragraph, though it should be stated that they are intended to be used only as showing tendencies rather than as giving an exact ratio.

INDEX NUMBERS COMPARING THE COST OF LIVING, EARNINGS
AND HOURS OF LABOR IN GERMANY, FRANCE, BELGIUM,
AND THE UNITED STATES, WITH GREAT BRITAIN
(100) FOR THE PERIOD 1905-1909.

	United Kingdom	Germany	France	Belgium	United States
Net rents paid	100	123	98	74	207
Cost of food, heating and lighting for a workman's family	100	118	118	99	138
Estimated cost of net rent, food and heating for an average family	100	119	114	94	152
Weekly earnings	100	88	75	63	230
Hours of labor per week	100	111	117	121	96

The German investigation. The Imperial Statistical Office published in 1909 a study of the household budgets of 860 families of persons of moderate income covering the year 1907-08.⁶ Practically all of the incomes were less than \$1200 (5000 marks), the majority being from \$200 to \$500. The principal value of this study is its detailed account of the various items of expenditure of the families studied. The facts as to the different types of expenditures by families living in urban and in rural districts and

⁶Germany. Statistisches Amt. Abteilung für Arbeiterstatistik. Erhebung von Wirtschaftsrechnungen minderbemittelter Familien in Deutschen Reiche. Bearb. im Kaiserlichen Statistischen Amte, Abteilung für Arbeiterstatistik. Berlin, C. Heymanns Verlag, 1909.

77, 229 p. incl. tables, diagrs. 30^{cm}. (2. Sonderheft zum Reichs-Arbeitsblatte).

A digest of the contents of this report is given in Bulletin 88 of the United States Bureau of Labor.

by families of wage earners and of salaried officials are clearly brought out. There is no attempt to compare the data for 1907-08 with any previous studies.

The Swedish investigation. At practically the same time that the German material was being collected, the Municipal Statistical Office of Stockholm made a similar budgetary study of the cost of living of 150 families⁷ with incomes of less than \$1200 per annum. The number of families is too small to make the study of service in comparing it with other countries, but as the statistical material is tabulated in a manner similar to that of the German investigation, it would be of interest to compare the standards of consumption in the two countries. One interesting feature of the Stockholm report is the account of the expenditures of one family given for a period of about 40 years.

Brief mention should also be made of the volume published by the Swedish Division of Labor Statistics on prices of food and rents in Sweden during the years 1904 to 1907.⁸ Prices of board and lodging for work-people are also given.

The French report. This report contains a compilation of retail prices of food secured from the bread-tax records, the slaughterhouse sales books, the books at the central markets, the records of coöperative stores, the accounts of institutions such as almshouses and boarding schools, the books of restaurants, etc.⁹ The wholesale prices on the Paris produce exchanges

⁷ Stockholm. Statistiska kontoret. Statistisk undersökning angående lefnadskostnaderna i Stockholm åren 1907-1908. På föranstaltning af Stockholms stadsfullmäktiges lifsmedelskommitté, verkställd af Stockholms stads Statistiska kontor. Stockholm, K. L. Beckmans boktryckeri, 1910.

2 p. l., 50*, 143 p. incl. tables. 27^{cm}. (Stockholms stads statistik. 10. Specialundersökningar, nr. 1).

Title on verso in French.

Tables and "Résumé" also in French.

⁸ Sweden. K. Kommerskollegii, Afdelning för Arbetsstatistik. Lifsmiddels- och Bostadspriser i Sverige under åren 1904-7. Utgifven af K. Kommerskollegii, Afdelning för Arbetsstatistik. Stockholm. 1909. 104 pp. 8°.

A digest of the contents of this report is given in Bulletin 84 of the United States Bureau of Labor.

⁹ France. Ministère du Travail et de la Prévoyance Sociale. Statistique générale de la France. Salaires et coût de l'existence à diverses époques, jusqu'en 1910. Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1911.

327 p. incl. tables. 26½^{cm}.

are also given. The wage data were secured principally from statements of the councils of *prud 'hommes* and from the pay rolls of government establishments. Computations of the cost of living are given, based on the information relating to food, fuel, and illuminating products. The question of rents and the increase in the cost of housing accommodations is treated by giving a compilation of data secured from real estate agents, managers of apartments, etc.

The Amsterdam report. This brief volume¹⁰ follows the same method as the preceding and consists of a compilation of the prices paid for food, etc., by institutions of various kinds in Amsterdam. As in the French report, the price curves here also show a distinct upward movement in recent years.

The Trieste report. This study¹¹ also follows the plan of the two preceding reports and makes use of the retail price records of institutions in the city of Trieste; rates of wages from a number of sources are also given.

Report of the United States Senate Committee on Wages and Prices. This four volume report¹² is a compendium of information on the recent tendencies in the movement of prices, wages, and the general problem of the increased cost of living. While it shows some evidences of haste in its preparation, it is nevertheless the most important and most useful American study of prices and the cost of living which has appeared since the 1903

¹⁰ Amsterdam. Bureau van statistiek. Prijzen van levensmiddelen te Amsterdam, Prix des vivres à Amsterdam. Amsterdam, J. Müller, 1911.

19 p. table, diags. 26^{cm}. (Statistische Mededeelingen uitgegeven door het Bureau van Statistiek der gemeente Amsterdam...no. 35). Text in Dutch and French.

¹¹ Alberti, Mario....II costo della vita, i salari e le paghe a Trieste nell'ultimo quarto di secolo. Ettore Vram, editore. Trieste, Tip. Nouva, 1911.

126 p., 21. fold. tables. 24½^{cm}. By direction of the Museo Commerciale, Trieste.

¹² U. S. Congress. Senate. Select committee on wages and prices of commodities. Investigation relative to wages and prices of commodities...Washington, Govt. print. off., 1911. 4 v. 23½^{cm}. (61st Cong., 3d sess. Senate. Doc. 847).

Contents.—I. Report, and views of minority.—II. Hearings, and digest of evidence.—III. Wages and prices in United States and abroad.—IV. Wholesale and retail prices in United States and abroad, and index.

report of the United States Bureau of Labor. Its value of course rests in the great variety of the statistical information presented—in fact it forms a cyclopedia of price and wage data.

Any mention of the material published on the subject of the cost of living should include a reference to the annual reports on retail prices made by the United States Bureau of Labor, which are soon to be extended so as to give a more frequent statement of these data.

A number of the states of the United States have had commissions at work on this subject; the most elaborate of these reports is that made by the Massachusetts commission,¹³ while briefer and less thorough studies have been made in Ohio, California, etc.

A list of the more important publications on the subject was recently published by the Library of Congress and in the near future a supplement to this publication will be issued.¹⁴

In practically all of the leading industrial countries of the world, recent studies on the cost of living have been published. With the exception of the British investigation, none of the reports has attempted to make any international comparisons and none of the more extensive investigations makes any comparisons covering a period of years. An international study on a coöperative basis would therefore be the first attempt of its kind and would supply us with information not now available.

¹³ Massachusetts. Commission on high cost of living . . . Report of the Commission on the cost of living. May, 1910. Boston, Wright & Potter printing co., state printers, 1910.

752 p. incl. tables. diagrs. (partly fold.) 23^{cm}. ([General court, 1910] House. [Doc.] 1750).

¹⁴ U. S. Library of Congress. Division of bibliography. Select list of references on the cost of living and prices; comp. under the direction of H. H. B. Meyer. Washington, Govt. print. off., 1910. v, 107 p. 25½^{cm}.